**Thinking punk**

**Robin Ryde**, Independent writer

**Russ Bestley**, Punk Scholars Network and London College of Communication

**Abstract**

In the double issue special edition of *Punk & Post Punk*, 4.2/4.3, Russ Bestley wrote a provocative article entitled ‘(I want some) demystification: Deconstructing punk’, reflecting on punk scholarship and the tropes and stereotypes that may be narrowing discourse on the subculture. In one section of the essay, the author questioned the value of a number of books on punk as a lifestyle and philosophy, including Craig O’Hara’s *The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!* (1999), Lars J. Kristiansen’s *Screaming For Change: Articulating a Unifying Philosophy of Punk Rock* (2012) and Robin Ryde’s *The Truth of Revolution, Brother: The Philosophies of Punk* (2014) (Bestley 2015: 119). Robin Ryde reached out to challenge some of the points raised in the original article and exercise a right to reply. This led to an extended dialogue between the two authors, which we have decided to reproduce in edited form here, along with a ‘think piece’ essay by Ryde reflecting on a range of contemporary attitudes towards punk and questioning where our subculture might be heading.

**Keywords**

punk

scholarship

history

criticism

philosophy

politics

**A dialogue**

**Sender:** robin@situationpress.com to r.bestley@lcc.arts.ac.uk

**Subject:** Your article ‘I want some demystification: Deconstructing punk’

Dear Russ, I recently read your article above, and I enjoyed it. It’s an interesting enquiry and one I support. One question I did want to pose is in relation to the reference to the publication *The Truth of Revolution Brother* (Ryde et al., 2014). I was puzzled by the sentence about the book, namely:

*The Truth of Revolution, Brother: The Philosophies of Punk* (2014) at least tried to work from the ground up, via a social media funding campaign and a series of interviews with ‘key’ figures within the (largely anarcho and hardcore) punk establishment, though I would argue that the initial premise of the project is flawed from the outset – determining punk as by definition left-leaning, liberal and progressive and seeking validation of that position in the construction of the debate. (Bestley, 2015)

I genuinely didn’t follow the argument that the book assumed a position that was 'left-leaning, liberal and progressive’ and that it sought validation of this position in the debate. We sought to anatomize punk to a degree, although mainly to set out to understand what sense certain known punks made of their lives and their beliefs some 35−40 years on. People like Penny Rimbaud made it clear (as we referred to in the book) that he had no interest in punk and his views had moved considerably since Crass (away from anarchism to something very different). The inclusion of Gavin McInnes (right-leaning Libertarian – for which we got a lot of stick from the hardline punks for keeping in the book) is another example of the non left-leaning interviewees that we were keen to represent. Mark Stewart is another whose views would be seen by most left-leaning people to be challenging, to say the least. I won’t go on naming the interviewees that don’t fit with the picture you have created, but I thought it was important to say this. I am beyond (too old maybe) arguing a position in the hope that the other person might concede a point and I am sure that there is probably more that we could agree on (than disagree with), but it doesn’t hurt to deepen the discussion. I’d be happy to hear your thoughts.

Robin

*Che said that revolution without love is no revolution at all, but neither is a thousand Angels with their backs against the wall.*

**Sender:** r.bestley@lcc.arts.ac.uk to robin@situationpress.com

Hi Robin,

To be honest, I did rethink twice whether to include your book in my rather brief catch-all overview of a number of publications that have attempted to ‘anatomize’ punk as you suggest, particularly those that try to get to the roots of some sort of essentialist punk ‘thinking’ that I find quite dubious. In the end I included you and tried to at least indicate that it was something of a more qualified choice than the other titles listed.

At a simplistic level, my argument, such as it is, is that attempts to categorize a ‘philosophy’ or even multiple ‘philosophies’ of ‘punk’ are doomed to failure, as anyone who has spent a lot of time involved with the subculture and/or associating with self-styled ‘punks’ over the years would I am sure attest. Much like its parent societies, punk as a subculture is so diverse as to be almost impossible to pinpoint in terms of any guiding ideology or set of principles. That doesn’t mean that I don’t accept that there is a widespread and heartfelt sense of do-it-yourself, anti-discriminatory, empowering and inclusive beliefs that travel widely among punk scenes – far from it, and that is one thing that I value about my lifelong involvement and the friends that I have made over many years. I guess part of my criticism aimed at your publication was in the title itself, and in the choice of interviewees – though I accept your argument that some don’t fall into the perhaps too sweeping or rash stereotype that I am arguing against.

Obviously you wanted to interview ‘notable’ people in the international punk scene, and you chose some intelligent, cogent and careful thinkers as a result. But punk, more widely, features an awful lot of perhaps not so careful thinkers, many less concerned with philosophy or politics than those you describe as the ‘hardline punks’ who gave you a rough ride for including Gavin McInnes. To my mind, some of the ‘hardline punks’ are more of a problem than any right-wingers in the scene, since at least the latter seldom (ever?) try to close everything down to their own self-contained belief system or exert peer pressure for others to conform to their world-view. I genuinely think *MRR* and *Profane Existence*, etc. have a lot to answer for in that respect.

What would be especially interesting and valuable would be a further contribution to *Punk & Post Punk* on this theme. Would you be interested in writing something, starting as a response from this communication thread? Or alternatively, would you be up for a discussion/interview type piece that could extend this dialogue into a more public domain and a punk-specialist readership?

From what you say here, I think we probably have far more in common than any minor differences, and as I say I appreciate your contacting me to raise the issue and offer a response to something I have written. Just out of interest, the original article that this piece was taken from evolved from a keynote talk at a *Punk Scholars Network Postgraduate Symposium* in Leicester a couple of years ago. Two of the Ph.D. students presenting gave papers based on some issues that they had observed within some contemporary punk environments – largely some arguments about ‘checking your privilege’ and ‘micro aggressions’ that, according to the speakers, ‘shouldn’t happen within punk’ because (their version of) punk is somehow pure and unadulterated by transgressions against the principles of modern identity politics. My paper then, and the article in the journal, was intended as a robust and perhaps rather inflammatory rebuttal of that position.

Russ

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Russ,

I appreciate you taking the time to expand on your thinking and understand much more of where you are coming from. In relation to your suggestion, I would be happy to contribute an article of some sort – I think it could be really interesting to do so. Not sure what shape it could take but this excites me. At the same time (and in the spirit of being open), I feel a little uncomfortable in saying this as I have some difficulties with academia in general and for a number of reasons. I find that the language used is often very exclusive (I have some examples\*, at the bottom of this e-mail, of words that I see being used with great frequency in academic circles). I find too that academics are often talking to themselves (i.e. the community) rather than to those outside it, which I think is a real shame. The focus of thinking is often driven by the funding agenda and the prospect of applause and accolades that are given by those inside the tent. And as a result, the academic world can be more like an echo chamber than anything else. However, all that I have said may just relate to one side/a darker side of academia (and all professions have their darker sides) and not the whole discipline, but this is where my discomfort grows from. I had some comments below about the specific circumstances of punk academics.

I do want to respond to a couple of your points perhaps so you see where we were coming from on this project (more generally and on the point about academia). You mentioned our selection of interviewees for *The Truth of Revolution, Brother* (2014) and it is a point that in some ways captures some more general observations that I have. It is perhaps worth saying that although I had connections into the ‘scene’ (when I was younger I used to live in Edinburgh and be friendly with the likes of Oi Polloi – was asked to join them in fact. I used to write a fanzine, play in a band, and at a younger age still was part of the punk scene in Nottingham), we had to start from scratch in recruiting interviewees. This represented a lot of work and the reality is that unless I was John Robb or someone similarly connected, it was never going to be easy or ‘complete’. There is a long list of people that were nearly-but-not-quites in terms of interviewees – Jaz Coleman, Banksy, Captain Sensible, Keith Levene, Gaye Advert, Billy Bragg, Scroobius Pip, Thurston Moore, Eve Libertine and others – all of whom agreed but for various reasons we never got to interview (or never got to print the interviews we did – another story there). And there were others that we had on our original list. In this context, I think there is a danger in extracting from this kind of work the reality of hustling to get the time of various interviewees. And it is this reality and ‘messiness’ that I sometimes find that an academic lens fails to take account of. That said, we were happy though that we got a genuinely interesting and varied range of perspectives and we felt that we got ‘enough’ to answer the questions that we set for the project.

We too spoke in the book (as you do) of what we called the ‘darker side of punk’; the ‘punkier than thou’ phenomenon (catered for by the punk police) – a set of hardline and narrow views that proscribe what is ‘acceptable’ punk attitude, behaviour and so on. For our own slice of this we received a lot of flack. For example, some people had never heard of Kickstarter and therefore assumed it was a con or rip off of some sort – telling us so in no uncertain terms. I spoke about the Gavin McInnes inclusion. Numerous people have and continue to give us grief online for the cost of the book, despite the fact that, believe it or not, the book has put us thousands of pounds out of pocket. Sadly, there is a very reactionary heartland to punk. Although I recognize my sadness only comes from an unfulfilled expectation/standard that I have unilaterally decided to adopt.

I also recall getting quite a lot of stick online from the punk academic community right at the start of the project (2014) – strangely critical, and verging on aggressive, comments. It felt a bit like we had entered a space that we weren’t meant to (because we weren’t academics) and a number of those who were strongly critical were/are members of the Punk Scholars Network. This puzzled us at the time and in fact has been a continuing theme of sorts. And now I think about it is probably part of my motivation to contact you as I did on reading your article (which felt like another punk academic swipe that didn’t contain a right to reply). I think the same accusation of ‘micro aggressions' in the punk space that your Ph.D. students highlighted (that you referred to) could be applied to the punk academics space. Perhaps there is a level of reflexiveness (\*Bingo!) not present in this group that could be useful.

Robin

**\*Academic language I see being used**

Agency, Conception, Critique, Hegemony, Reflexive, Contested, Legitimacy, Contingent, Narrative, Situated, Historicizing, Discourse, Frame, Intersubjectivity, Heterodoxy, Dialectic, Problematizing, Constructed, Cultural Resources, Lexicon, Artefact, Normative, Praxis, Appropriation, Massification, Ritual

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Hi Robin,

I appreciate your openness about your concerns with academia, and the vagaries of academic jargon. You may be a little surprised, but I have to say I tend to largely share your concerns in this respect – I will happily admit that there are very few words on your list of suspects that I use within my own writing, and still more that I don’t really fully understand. I (mis)spent my teenage years and early adulthood in the 1970s and 80s living in various squats, either on the dole or odd-jobbing as a roadie, then later working as a warehouseman and forklift truck driver before redundancy sent me back to Art College as a mature student in the early 1990s. I’m certainly no lifelong career academic (indeed, many of the ‘Punk Scholars’ can share similar stories), and I don’t specialize in the Cultural Theory or Social Science fields that more often use that kind of language. Having said that, without trying to sound defensive, I also recognize that every trade, discipline or profession develops its own specific vocabulary, from ethnography to astrophysics to plumbing, and I have learnt over the years that sometimes you need to engage with some of that new language in order to better understand the arguments at hand.

Meanwhile, I fully acknowledge some of your concerns. When I write articles or books etc, I try my best to avoid too much specific jargon and to cover as much as I can in ‘real English’ – this is actually something that I am quite passionate about. But the problem works both ways – even when I write for mainstream publications (*The Art of Punk* (Russ Bestley and Alex Ogg, 2012) book, articles in *Vive Le Rock* or *Streetsounds* magazines), reviewers often make assumptions about my writing and it being ‘academic’ before even reading it – the job title comes before me, unfortunately. To me, ‘academic writing’ differs from (some) journalism in that statements should be backed up with some sort of evidence, and assumptions cannot be made without a form of ‘critical engagement’, which simply means questioning things we are told as accepted facts.

My article that kicked off this conversation was an attempt to open up a range of these issues to scrutiny and discussion – I thought I was equally scathing about the impenetrable navel-gazing of academia as I was about the right-on punk police and their micro aggressions. Right from the outset I tried to raise the question of ‘what is a punk scholar?’ – and, particularly, the role of subject experts from outside the ‘academy’ (I know many serious punk fans and collectors, in fact I would count myself among them, and they can be extremely knowledgeable of fine detail, to a far greater extent than most ‘scholars’).

I do know that many of us involved in both *Punk & Post Punk* and in the Punk Scholars Network are keen to engage with contributors and audiences outside the ‘echo chamber’ that you mention. In fact, one other thing we have in common here – I totally understand that your book would have been something of a labour of love, and that you are out of pocket on production. That’s an extremely familiar story to me, as a graphic designer, since I am always taking on projects for the sake of the project itself, or favours for mates, friends-of-friends within the punk scene, etc.

My point regarding your choice of interviewees was slightly different from your reading. Again, I understand the legwork involved in setting up, conducting and recording the interviews, and the difficulty in actually securing people in the first place. Also, you needed to get some familiar and well-known names to make the book commercially viable and interesting, of course. But even from the famous punk ‘names’, I would suggest there are other, perhaps less ‘philosophical’ voices that might be of interest? Off the top of my head – Mick Jones, Jean-Jacques Burnel, Beki Bondage, Olga Toy Doll, Gene October, Pauline Murray, Peter Test Tube, Animal, Pete Shelley, Nick Tesco, Mark Perry, Jon Langford, Spizz, Jake Burns, Garry Bushell… the list could go on and on. As I said previously, I accept that there is a widespread sense of liberal fair play within (most) punk scenes, but many ‘unknown’ punk fans and bands that I know are probably more concerned with going out, getting drunk and ‘having a laugh’ than they are with political campaigning. I would quite like to hear that side of the story too.

I’m really sorry if my article ‘felt like another punk academic swipe that didn’t contain a right to reply’ – I guess the journal format tends to look like that from outside, and we need to be careful to communicate the opposite to readers. The article was fairly polemical (and took a swipe at a wide range of targets), and I did actually hope to provoke some discussion and reaction. As I said earlier, this discussion is just that, and I would be delighted to publish some kind of response – which would also serve a secondary purpose in demonstrating the ‘right to reply’ that you felt excluded from in the first place to other readers who might feel similarly maligned.

I am also sorry to hear that you felt the original plans for your book received a negative response from the Punk Scholars Network. That ‘reflexiveness’ that you suggest is obviously necessary – to be honest, I think if you continue to engage with the network you will find that we tend to be quite an inclusive but robustly critical bunch, and obtuse negativity without reason is frowned upon (or, again as I say in my article in relation to earlier, non-‘safe space’, punk scenes, those receiving flak give back as much as they get).

Russ

**\*Words not used in this communication**

Agency, Conception, Critique, Hegemony, ~~Reflexive~~, Contested, Legitimacy, Contingent, Narrative, Situated, Historicizing, Discourse, Frame, Intersubjectivity, Heterodoxy, Dialectic, Problematizing, Constructed, Cultural Resources, Lexicon, Artefact, Normative, Praxis, Appropriation, Massification, Ritual

**Sender:** robin@situationpress.com to r.bestley@lcc.arts.ac.uk

Hi Russ

As I mentioned before I am now attaching an article (or Think Piece maybe) which refers to some of the ideas we have touched upon in our discussions. It’s written as if it were an article to go into something like *Punk & Post Punk* although it’s not academic in the conventional sense (or perhaps any sense). It may not be suitable but I want to do something with it. It might work alongside (and perhaps as a prompt for) further discussions akin to those we’ve already been having.

Robin

**What are we doing to punk?**

**Robin Ryde**, Independent author

This year, 2016, *Punk London* is convening, on a fairly large scale, ‘events, gigs, films, talks, exhibits and more, in celebrating 40 years of punk heritage and influence in London’.[[1]](#endnote-2) As an event it has attracted a lot of controversy. Malcolm McLaren’s son Joe Corre has vowed to burn £5m worth of punk memorabilia claiming that ‘rather than a movement for change, punk has become like a fucking museum piece or a tribute act’.[[2]](#endnote-3) He is talking not only of the *Punk London* celebrations but also more broadly about the ‘movement’. We might wonder how Joe imagines that burning something worth £5m might help the movement, but nevertheless the motivation for his protest is perhaps understandable.

What he is talking about is referred to in Situationist circles (wherever they might be) as *recuperation* whereby radical ideas, such as those associated with punk, become trivialized, commodified, neutralized and ‘safely incorporated back within mainstream society, where they can be exploited’ (Debord 1957: 2). A great example of this is the Summer’s McDonald’s Live Bolder marketing campaign which has taken the typography and colour scheme of the Sex Pistols’ album *Never Mind the Bollocks* (distinctive yellow and pink with cut-out letters) to sell BBQ Chicken & Bacon Wraps and other delectable foodstuffs (the vegetarians among us let out a sigh of disbelieve and shake their heads). McDonalds has clearly done its research on the Zeitgeist of the day, albeit a retrospective celebration. And so while there may be some merit to what McLaren’s son is talking about, what I want to suggest is that we have been doing so much more to punk than crouching down with our brushes and trowels at the site of the punk archaeological dig.

I was one of three people who wrote and published a book in 2014 called *The Truth of Revolution, Brother* about the ideas and philosophy that sat behind punk. It was an enquiry into how some of the architects of punk had lived their lives since the punk explosion (Ryde et al. 2014). We interviewed 35 or so known punks in the UK, the US, Iceland and Germany, and we set out to understand how their ideals had weathered over time, what changes had been made to their beliefs, how punk had shaped their life decisions and so on. Despite looking at a cultural endeavour that started decades ago, the focus was squarely on now and the realities that we face today. The idea for the project came up fairly randomly in a conversation between the three authors. We all had a common interest in punk and independent music and had been influenced significantly by the punk era. I had been one of the many to have written a punk fanzine, sneaked into gigs at a young age, played in a band, spray painted walls and clothes – that sort of thing. The book seemed like an exciting project and reflected something we all cared about. Methodologically, our intention wasn’t to follow a kind of ‘smash and grab’ approach to the process because we wanted to get underneath the bonnet of the lives that our interviewees lived. And so we would have multiple conversations with individuals. We would hang out and stay overnight with many. Have meals. Build friendships. And get to a level of engagement that was as authentic and as honest as it could be.

We learned a great deal from the project that was consistent with its original ambitions – from Jon Gnarr, a punk who became the anarchist mayor of Reykjavik (heavily influenced by Crass) to Gavin McInnes, former *Vice* founder, TV personality and right-leaning Libertarian with a penchant for bating Liberals. And from Mark Stewart of the Pop Group who believed in agitating from inside the ‘system’ to Dick Lucas from the Subhumans who was committed to remaining untainted by the ‘system’ and outside it as much as possible. As well as learning from the original intent of the project we also made discoveries about how people in the wider punk community felt about the movement, and it is this that I want to focus on.

**The counter revolution**

Before embarking on what might be thought of as a somewhat critical analysis of punk – for that is what this is – it is important to acknowledge that punk is a diverse field. For everything that I will say, there will no doubt be examples and instances that will offer a different perspective. It would be worrying if that were not the case. But the argument that I would like to put is that there are features of the punk movement that significantly attenuate its contribution and set up some unresolved contradictions that deserve our attention. Not necessarily the kind of attention that involves burning £5m worth of memorabilia, but something hopefully more useful.

**Nostalgia: The construction of punk as something that is firmly in the past**

The word nostalgia comes from the Greek compound consisting of nóstos, meaning ‘homecoming’, and álgos, meaning ‘pain or ache’. At least this is what Wikipedia tells me anyway. It describes a sense of melancholy or loss associated with events that occurred in the past, and it is related to a romanticization and glorification of those events, as if the best is behind us. Various studies of nostalgia (Morewedge 2013) have highlighted the way in which nostalgia introduces a bias to the memories we have of our past experiences. As with all memories, time allows us an opportunity to select from what we have experienced (rather than remembering everything) and also to construct from those memories whatever account we wish to give to particular events. A testament to this idea is the thousands of people that have claimed that they were at the famous Sex Pistols gig in June 1976 at Manchester’s Lesser Free Trade Hall – when the venue had an estimated maximum capacity of 150 people, and actual audience members were thought to be less than 50 people including band members (Nolan 2006).

In this context though, I am not interested in the veracity of peoples’ memories about our shared punk past, but instead about the effect that nostalgia has on the ideas, beliefs, philosophy and politics of the punk genre. The danger that I see in being nostalgic about punk, in the way described, is that we are firmly consigning it to history and in doing so rendering the genre and its ideas both impotent and irrelevant. After all, if punk is something that was, how can it be something that is? If it is something we keep talking about with a dewy-eyed romanticism, in the days when we would get chased down the street by Teddy Boys, when we could have a good old go at Thatcher, when we would copy music on a double-cassette Boom Box for one another (as fun as this all was) then we will lock it away in time forever. We might also lock away some dubious versions of our collective punk past that ignore the utter messiness and confusion associated with what we were doing at the time.

Nostalgia, it seems, comes with the turf when speaking of punk, but the strength and impact of this predilection is eroding it away and removing any sense of its pertinence to the realities we face in 2016 and beyond. Nostalgia would have us believe that punk is at its best when it is something that no longer exists.

**Fundamentalism: The construction of punk as something that is change-resistant**

Beyond nostalgia, there is another force within the movement that risks hacking punk away at the knees, and that is related to the ‘punkier than thou’ phenomenon.

The idea of being ‘punkier than thou’, refers to a kind of informal hierarchy of ‘punkness’ within the movement… This can be seen… in the division between the political and the non-political sides of punk, embodied by bands such as Siouxsie and the Banshees as contrasted with bands like Crass. It is manifest in the views expressed by some that regard the first wave of punk (Sex Pistols, the Damned, the Clash etc.) as more ‘punk’ than ensuing waves (Discharge, Chumbawamba, Big Black, etc.) Particularly in the UK, it is exhibited in a punk hierarchy that suggests that working-class punks have a greater right to claim punk than middle- class punks. It is exhibited in subdivisions between meat-eating punks and vegetarian punks, and then again between vegetarian and vegan punks. (Ryde et al. 2014)

On the hundreds, possibly thousands, of social media forums that are related to punk it is a recurring theme. Advocates of different sides attack one another on a daily basis and much of this revolves around a definitional argument about what ‘real’ punk is. This excerpt from a discussion thread on Facebook’s Crass Group (168,883 members) illustrates this point[[3]](#endnote-4):

Person A: You know what, I’m unliking this page. I’m fed up with the ‘Crass’ page posting stupid little life quotes that are comparable to Pinterest threads. I want loud, angry, anti everything punk rock. This whole feel good bullshit is nonsense. Take your quotes and stuff ‘em.

Person B: Unliking is the punk thing to do.

Person C: Then you have no idea what Crass stood for. Perhaps this isn’t the page for you.

Person D: If you're looking for nicely packaged, generic, paint-by-numbers punk rock then Crass definitely isn't for you. Crass was a band comprised of individuals who challenged the status quo not only in the UK and the world, but also within the tiny world of punk rock. There is certainly more than enough toothless, meaningless rebellion-porn punk rock that you'd enjoy much more.

Person E: Maybe it’s time to go back to playing with your trucks, little boy.

Person F: What a dumb fuck. Crass aren’t anti-everything.

Person G: (To Person D) − you are not punk at all!

The right to self-expression and personal freedom once synonymous with punk has increasingly been replaced by a rulebook as thick as your arm. Another illustration of this is the *Pay No More* than instruction associated with the anarcho-punk releases of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Rather than being a liberating tool that, at the time, made singles and LP’s affordable to a wider audience and prevented the corporates from profiting from punk, the *Pay No More* maxim has now become used as a weapon to police the community. Although if it were a weapon it would probably be the terrorist weapon of choice – the AK47; not particularly accurate, easy to get your hands on and designed to cause a lot of indiscriminate damage. So if an album release, a gig ticket, a book, a poster, a video or any punk item that is sold is judged by someone – anyone! – to be expensive then it’s okay to open fire. Apparently. And the presumption would seem to be that some elaborate scam or rip off is always being orchestrated by the seller. Furthermore, and perhaps because of the effects of nostalgia, it is easily forgotten that there has been almost 40 years of cumulative inflation bearing down on the means of punk production. The *Stations of the Crass* album, which wore the *Pay No More* than sticker of £3.00, equates to roughly £13.70 in 2016 prices – over four times the original value. It seems a little petty to be mentioning this, but this is indicative of the straightjacket that punk has climbed into.

In these terms, punk starts to resemble a form of fundamentalism, which, as we have seen in religion and in politics and elsewhere, this is the surest way to ensure that change is resisted. Daring to drift outside of the punk swim lanes becomes an act seemingly worthy of moral rebuke. Swim too far and you risk getting your punk stripes ripped entirely from your sleeves.

**Objectification: The construction of punk as something that is outside of us**

Assisted by the velvet conveyor belt of nostalgia, punk becomes returned to and firmly lodged in the past. And with a cage built around it and with it riven by internal divisions, punk becomes hardened to change. But it doesn’t end here.

Increasingly we find ourselves objectifying punk and in doing so constructing it as an artefact, as an historical record, an object of study – a thing. Part of the problem in doing this is that this positions punk outside of us, as something external to us, whereas for most people that identify with the punk movement, it represented a diverse set of experiences, feelings, and beliefs – all of which occur within us.

In objectifying punk we create an incomplete, if not a false, impression of what punk is; as something that is about punk things – the music, the clothes, the art, the fanzines and so on – and not about the thinking, the feelings and the human investment that caused these to be. Furthermore, in objectifying punk we allow it to be used as a resource that serves the agenda of whoever wants to get their hands on it. The McDonald’s Live Bolder marketing campaign sees punk used as a commercial resource; something we can assume the corporation believes will strengthen sales. Kim Kardashian who was photographed this month wearing a Discharge-styled leather jacket (although the actual band name was Disclose – a Japanese punk group) sees punk as a resource to bolster her image – despite never having been within a 100 miles of the punk movement. Scholars of the genre categorize, dissect and mount punk beneath glass using it no less as a resource than McDonald’s or Kim Kardashian. And whereas the ethics of commerce, for example, have little to say about the impact on punk as a resource in this process, there may be a case for reflecting on the way in which academic research of this kind alters the field of study itself, and constructs (rather than observes) punk according to particular paradigms.

In an extreme form, the objectification process leads to a fetishization of punk. The things of punk are worshipped. People buy multiple copies of the exact same vinyl release, each one of course sounding the same as the next. A guitar that looks very much like the guitar that Ian Curtis played in Joy Division goes up on ebay for $9,500.[[4]](#endnote-5) Presumably holding it brings you closer to the spirit of punk.

**Punk is dead, long live punk**

To the question at the head of this Think Piece – *What are we doing to punk?* One answer is that we have locked it in the past, restricted its ability to change and adapt, and turned it into a series of trinkets carefully arranged on the mantelpiece. And the ‘we’ in this argument is not really the evil corporations ready to steal our culture or the rich and famous keen to appropriate the cool of punk, it is the fans, the followers and the founders of punk.

How we construct punk and what we permit it to be is important, and it feels like we should be past the time when we need to keeping reaching for the comforting touchstones of punk – the knee-jerk rebellion, the Jamie Reid visual tropes, the tourettes of the cry of ‘rip-off’, the familiar punk typography. It was never really about that. And on the point of the visual effects produced by the Letrasets, the manual typewriters, and the copy machines that were used in the DIY production of fanzines some 30−40 years ago – that are now religiously recreated in modern publications about punk – these were used because that was *all* that was available. These don’t need to be used now. We have digital technologies that remove the pain of having to stand at a photocopier machine for hours on end. Re-using these is just another turn of the key in the safe of punk history.

The death of punk though is not inevitable. The possibilities of allowing a fresh breeze to circulate through the punk camp, letting air into the debate, are inspiring. Loosening our hardened, sometimes ferocious, allegiances to definitions of ‘real punk’ will help. Framing punk as a liberating force, as it once was, rather than as a constraining force is where greater promise lies.

Recently Penny Rimbaud of Crass sat down to re-write the lyrics to *Yes Sir, I Will* – a piece he went on to perform with friend and Crass band mate Eve Libertine and a six piece jazz outfit at the 2014 Rebellion festival. 31 years after the original script was written Penny wanted to approach the work in a different way – to address the duality that had been represented in the first version. He wanted to ‘take out some of the ugliness’ of the original, to ‘recognise that while the anger expressed through *Yes Sir* was appropriate and (in many ways) was the first time it had been expressed, it didn’t need to continue’.[[5]](#endnote-6) The result is a lyrical re-write that is just as if not more challenging than the original – prose that that doesn’t allow the reader the safety of being able to take sides and to affirm a view that separates the good guys from the bad guys. As Penny says himself:

In reworking *Yes, Sir, I Will* for performance at the Rebellion Festival of 2014, I became crucially aware of the fundamental dualism within the Existential thought that had driven the original script of 1983. Quite naturally, I became concerned that in my attempts to affect the material world I might very well have been doing little more than adding to its vexations. It was a predicament, one which for some time appeared insoluble. I was committed to perform the piece, but was unable to find the key wherein I could rework it to reflect what I knew must take a more compassionate overview... Through replacing vicious anger with love, and grey robots with people (albeit sometimes as puppeteers), I was largely able to satisfy my wish to change the passionate outcries of *Yes, Sir* into ones which expressed and promoted compassion and love (albeit the hugely demanding realm of love in its unconditional form). (Ryde et al. 2014: 161)

This example of punk’s ability to adapt while remaining a powerful and exciting force speaks to the idea that punk simultaneously was and is. It is not necessary to make a binary choice between these polarities. It is a both/and solution rather than an either/or problem.

The purpose of this Think Piece is to encourage a re-balancing of an enquiry into the meaning and value of what punk is today, in place of a preoccupation with history and the production of punk history. And alongside this enquiry is a further encouragement to look not only to music and to art but to consider the role of punk in our decisions as parents, carers, political beings, workers, philosophers, educators and so on – to re-open the possibility and the audacity that punk started with.

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Notes

1. <http://punk.london>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/mar/16/malcolm-mclaren-son-joe-corre-burn-punk-memorabilia-punk-london-queen>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Crass Facebook Group thread, 1 March 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. A copy of the white Vox Phantom VI guitar used by Ian Curtis is advertised for $9,500 on Ebay, June 2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Performance of *Yes Sir, I Will*, *Art of Crass* exhibition, LCB Leicester, 10 June 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)